

Minutes: RPA Chairpersons Forum Meeting, 16 January 2008, Ballybot House, Newry, 1600
-1730

Present: Education Minister Caitriona Ruane
Aodan MacPoilin (CnaG)
Prof Bernard Cullen (Staff Com)
Colm Cavanagh (NICIE)
Sally McKee (GTCNI)
Rev Robert Herron (WELB)
Dr Douglas Osler (SEELB)
Maire Young (YCNI)
David McKee (CCEA)
Alderman Roy Beggs (NEELB)
Eithne Woulfe (Vice Chair CCMS)

Will Haire (DE)
Dr Eddie Rooney (DE)
Gavin Boyd (ESAIT)

Apologies: Geraldine Tighchelaar (IEF)
Jim Rodgers (BELB)
Marie Donnell (SELB)
Bishop John McAreavey (CCMS)
Sean Mag Uidhir (I na G)

In attendance: Dr Mark Browne (ESAIT)
Fearghal O'Reilly (DE)

Meeting Commenced 1610

- The Minister opened the meeting by welcoming everyone to the fourth meeting. She also explained why she could not attend the previous meeting due to the tragic house fire in Omagh and she was visiting the school and principal.
- The Minister emphasised the importance of working together to ensure the changes to the education system happen and the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) is established. As the Chairpersons are the leaders of the organisations involved, the Minister urged that they work closely with Will, Gavin, Eddie and the teams involved. Work is progressing on ICT, Finance and Human Resources.
- The convergence is continuing and there are two areas of importance, education quality and standards. The launch of 'Every School a good school' consultation will be happening in the near future (21 January) and a finance task force on Literacy and Numeracy will be established in the near future.
- The Minister had visited Tor Bank special school and said she was interested in working with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) as there is a major gap in the system in relation to the health of our young people in schools.
- The Minister said that it is an exciting time and that real changes are happening to the education system. She said that senior people are already engaging with the

RPA policies. It is important to find ways to draw on the expertise of senior staff on the detailed implementation work.

- An update was provided on the negotiations with different political parties on the budget. The public consultations on the Budget and Draft Programme for Government were held in Derry, Belfast and Armagh and the views will be taken on board.
- Eddie Rooney provided an update on the initial draft of the first bill. It has been completed and is in the process of being refined in preparation for introduction to the Executive by the Spring.
- There is an issue around local accountability on the ESA. The work is continuing on 2nd wave of legislation.
- Eddie stated that the Department is a learning Department and as the first recommendation, how the department is operating in the changing environment with the implications of the RPA.
- Gavin Boyd made a follow up presentation to the presentation on the 15 November setting out how the change management strategy would be taken forward through a process of extensive engagement with management in the existing education bodies over the next 6 months. This would ensure staff have the opportunity to contribute to the design and development of the new ESA, can identify issues that need to be addressed and can contribute to planning the transition.
- The change management presentation has been delivered to senior management in the organisations and it has been positively received by all. The senior managers have agreed the change management strategy. The trade unions have endorsed the message and committed to modernising the system..
- There are significant issues in the transition to the ESA arising from differences in the application of policy across Board areas. Gavin gave an example of the different prices of school meals which cannot continue under a single authority. These harmonisation issues will be addressed as part of the Convergence Programme.
- Working groups will shortly be established on Education Quality and Children's Services to develop proposals for ESA in these areas.
- Staff across the existing organisations continue to be engaged on a regular basis through the consultative groups that have been established for the projects being taken forward by Project Managers in ESAIT in the areas of HR, Financial Planning, Finance and Accounting systems, ICT, and communications.
- Colm Cavanagh (NICIE) asked how ESA will work on the ground? Will it all be centralised or will it work from (existing) local structures. Eg in the transport arrangements under ESA, will there be area boundaries? Gavin replied that there will have to be harmonisation to ensure the consistent application of transport policy across all areas. In line with the Transfer, Transform, Innovate (TTI) approach the transport service will be in the transfer category. It is therefore anticipated that it will come into ESA largely under existing arrangements with delivery managed at a local level but with a re-organisation of management into a regional structure. Will Haire commented that it was crucial that on Day 1 the schools have one contact point and that the information and support they need is readily available. There is extensive expertise in the current system which must be drawn on in developing new

arrangements and in ensuring that services continue to be delivered effectively in the interim.

- David McKee (CCEA) asked about bringing DHSSPS into the issue, as within transforming the system you can also innovate the system. Using an example of school meals he said Health and Education could cooperate on school meals to ensure they are healthy. He also made the point that schools should not have to raise funds by having tuck shops which are often stocked with fatty, sugary foods.
- Minister Caitríona Ruane said the system is not perfect and she has had a meeting with the Agriculture Minister to discuss providing local produce to schools for meals. She also said that she was on working groups with Health Minister Michael McGimpsey and she would be talking to him about the obesity crisis.
- Sally McKee (GTCNI) asked about the Special Needs review and is it going to be put out for consultation and when?
- The Minister responded that it is an important review and the resources need to be found in order properly do the review.
- Alderman Roy Beggs (NEELB) expressed concern at the under provision of speech therapists operating in primary schools and it is inadequate that pupils are getting their first access to speech therapy in primary two.
- Will Haire responded that initial work had demonstrated how speech therapists should be working with the teacher and teachers should be reinforcing the work of speech therapists as is the case in Enniskillen. The Minister added that careers services in schools should promote speech and other therapies as a career.
- Reverend Herron (WELB) asked about Day 1 operational functions in ESA and the different policies in different board areas, for example in the WELB, transport policies would be different in the rural areas as opposed to city areas and how will the policy for free transport be implemented as one rule will not fit all.
- Alderman Beggs (NEELB) said the issue of concessionary travel on school buses and the ability to charge fares for pupils who do not qualify for free travel when there are empty seats on school buses and no public transport available needs to be resolved.
- Gavin Boyd replied that many such issues of differential application of policy have already been identified and that more will emerge as we take forward the planning for ESA. These issues will be addressed within the Convergence Programme as part of a process of harmonisation.
- Douglas Osler (SEELB) said that there would be pressure to equalise upwards by raising all services to the level of the highest and this would lead to massive costs. He also added that youth work should be made a priority.
- The Minister responded that there are big decisions in the budget over early years and youth work, and that expectations have been raised.
- Maire Young (YCNl) said the Youth Service contributes to the outcomes of other departments. The Youth Service involves large numbers of volunteers as well as paid staff. Education gets good value for money from its non-formal sector
- Prof Cullen (Staff Com) queried whether or not there is money identified in the budget for Education to facilitate those staff in the RPA affected organisations who

wish to take premature severance with a financial package by April 09, since there are several employing organisations in the sector who would not be in a position to fund such packages from their own resources. Furthermore, given that it might not be in the management interest to let experienced staff go before 09, could the Minister give a guarantee that any severance package to take effect in 2010 or 2011 will be no less attractive than those available for termination of employment in April 09?

- Will Haire replied that there will be a lot of people who may wish to leave by April 09 and this number may be larger than what we can let go. The experience of running these organisations lay in the 50-60 age range
- Gavin Boyd said that part of the planning process currently underway is to develop service delivery models and organisational structures and therefore to identify posts “at risk of redundancy”. The vast majority of staff in the education services will not be affected as they are in school –based services. The number of redundancies will also be reduced through vacancy control and current data suggests there may be around 350 unfilled vacancies in the education sector. (This number includes vacancies filled by staff on temporary contracts).
- Aodan Mac Poilin (CnaG) commented about that the “bits” not swallowed by ESA, smaller organisations that will be left out voluntary grammar schools fitted in quite well with this and that his organisation was small but growing in numbers.
- He commented that the revised curriculum decisions were made and submissions were sent in on the consultation in May 2006 on a monolingual template but the English language curriculum was changed and Irish medium schools received guidance and circulars in the English language.
- The Minister commented that in the past, policies were decided upon and then the Irish medium sector was approached for their comments. This cannot be the case, as children are getting confused if this is not done right. On the issue of continued sectoral support, ESA cannot be a monolingual organisation.
- David McKee invited Aodan to meet with him to discuss the issue of translation of documents into Irish.
- He asked about the redundancy packages that will be available to staff members. Gavin commented that Shane McCurdy was working on the finance available and once the budget has been finalised there will be a better idea of what we can or cannot do.
- Prof Cullen made the point that funding the retirements will not be the responsibility of the Department or the ESA until April 09 and until then it will remain the responsibility of the existing education employers.
- Colm Cavanagh asked how often did Gavin and Will meet with the Chief Executives. They replied that they met on a monthly basis.
- The meeting drew to a close at 1735.